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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TEL AVIV 000498

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SUBJECT: (C) RELIGIOUS LEADERS WEIGH MEASURES TO GENERATE GRASSROOTS SUPPORT FOR PEACE, THREE YEARS AFTER ALEXANDRIA DECLARATION

REF: 04 TEL AVIV 6271

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Gene A. Cretz for reasons 1.4 (b ,d).

1. (U) This message was coordinated with and cleared by ConGen Jerusalem.

2. (C) Summary: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim religious leaders of the Permanent Follow-up Committee for the Implementation of the Alexandria Declaration ("the Alexandria Group") met in East Jerusalem January 24 to review ways to fulfill commitments they made in Alexandria, Egypt three years earlier. Renewing their support for the principles outlined in the declaration, they decided to take practical steps, and focus on ways to take advantage of the current opening provided by new Israeli and Palestinian governments and other developments since Yassir Arafat's death to generate widespread grassroots support for the formal peace process within their own communities. Without blaming any one group, many admitted that their efforts and results as a group were so far disappointing. They endorsed in principle the creative and positive proposal advocated by Sheikh Imad Faluji of Gaza that they should try from now on to speak with one voice to the world community and should establish, register, and staff NGO offices in the West Bank and Gaza that could "shorten the road to peace" by delivering much-needed messages of moderation and religious tolerance to counter religious extremism prevalent in their communities. End summary.

3. (SBU) The "Alexandria Group" of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim religious leaders convened in East Jerusalem's Christmas Hotel January 24 in a meeting attended by Embassy Tel Aviv and ConGen Jerusalem officers, midlevel Israeli and Palestinian officials, and NGO representatives. The occasion for the group's plenary meeting, formally known as the "Follow-up Committee for Implementation of the Alexandria Declaration," was to mark the third anniversary of the Declaration, and review and endorse measures proposed at a smaller December 5th gathering (reported reftel) to increase grassroots support for the formal peace process. Both the December and January meetings were funded under an Embassy Tel Aviv grant to the International Centre for Reconciliation, Canon White's UK-based NGO for ongoing Israeli-Palestinian inter-religious dialogue.

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Attendees  
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4. (U) Jewish delegates included Rabbi David Rosen (who chaired the meeting) Rabbi David Brodman, Israeli Chief Rabbinate Director-General Oded Wiener, and Rabbi Michael Melchior (Labor-Meimad MK, recently appointed Deputy Education Minister). Muslim delegates included Sheikhs Taysir Tamimi and Talal Sidr from the West Bank and Sheikh Imad Faluji from Gaza. Christian delegates included Greek Orthodox Archbishop Aristarchos, Syrian Orthodox Bishop Mar Sewerios Malki Murad, Armenian Bishop Ariv Shrivanian, and PLO Executive Committee and Palestinian Legislative Council member Dr. Emil Jarjoui, as well as the Archbishop of Canterbury's Special Middle East Representative, Canon Andrew White. ConGen Jerusalem and Embassy Tel Aviv POL and PD officers observed, along with Rabbi Ron Kronish of the Inter-religious Coordinating Council in Israel, Gita Hazani from MK Melchior's NGO Mosaica, Belaynesh Zevadia, counsellor from the MFA Religious Affairs Bureau, and visiting George Mason University Professor of World Religions and Conflict Resolution Marc Gopin.

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Plan for Increased Effectiveness:  
One Voice, and Three Offices  
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5. (C) Sheikh Imad Faluji of Gaza briefed the group on the proposals discussed and approved by a smaller group of Alexandria participants at a meeting held December 5, 2004 in west Jerusalem. The Alexandria Declaration had not yet lived up to its promise, he said, due to "laziness and a lack of seriousness." Those shortcomings could be addressed if the religious leaders now took concrete actions:

-- (C) First, to be taken seriously, the Alexandria Group should speak with one voice at international conferences on religions for peace, or not at all. There was no point in having three separate statements with each leader speaking only for his own religion, he said. "Among ourselves, we can argue and dissent and express ourselves openly. But if we want world support for our efforts for peace in the holy land, we should clearly identify ourselves as one group, not three, and deliver one united message at public gatherings." Doing this will "shorten the road" to peace.

-- (C) Second, the Alexandria Group's task is different than President Abu Mazen's and Prime Minister Sharon's. As religious leaders, Faluji said, "we should address the right people - people in our own communities - directly." In order to succeed in that public outreach, the Alexandria leaders should establish and register NGO offices in the West Bank and Gaza that could mirror the existing NGO "Mosaica" in Jerusalem founded by Rabbi Melchior and Elie Wiesel after the January 2002 Alexandria Declaration. Such NGO offices would be public outreach centers for peace and tolerance education and moderate religious interpretation to counter the much more well-organized and well-financed extremist offices that currently spread destructive messages in our region, he emphasized. All three could be known by the same name, "Mosaica." One office could be opened in Gaza, under Sheikh Faluji's direction, and another in the West Bank, near Jerusalem. (West Bank locations being considered are Bethany/Azariyah, under Sheikh Tamimi, or possibly Bethlehem, under one of the Christian leaders.)

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Agreement in Principle; Debate on Methods  
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16. (C) Dr. Jarjoui complained that although he, Sheikhs Faluji and Sidr, and Rabbis Melchior and Smadja, had agreed in principle of the need for such NGOs on the Palestinian side during the December meeting, no one present besides Canon White and Sheikh Faluji appeared to have received a draft proposal or budget for the creation of such offices. He recommended, and all concurred, that written draft proposals and budgets be circulated to the group before they give formal concurrence to establishing the NGOs and seeking international financial support for their work. After a long procedural debate that reflected the leaders' concern for maintaining their own relevance as the Alexandria Group, participants agreed that a smaller "Executive Committee" of five to six specific leaders could serve as the body that would formally approve the NGOs' establishment. They also agreed to Canon White's proposal to formally empower the Executive Committee to serve as a "rapid response mechanism" that could resolve and defuse potential conflicts between religious communities, in addition to its role of handling routine decisions between larger plenary sessions.

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Sheikh Tamimi: "Choose Life"  
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17. (C) Sheikh Tamimi greeted his Muslim colleagues on the Eid al-Adha, and his Christian and Jewish colleagues on Tu B'Shvat (the new year for the trees) and the recent Orthodox Christian Epiphany and New Year. He said he considered the Alexandria Group as friends whose personal relationships could help "realize the lost peace in this holy land." The group should continue its implementation of the declaration so that history will record that we did something positive for the peace process, he said. He was pleased that the leaders could say they were at least on a path toward stopping bloodshed and protecting humanity. "We all live together, and hurt for any individual among us who is killed regardless of their faith," he continued. However, Tamimi was "depressed" because the Alexandria Group's efforts were not producing any movement in the peace process. He pointed out that Abu Mazen had achieved real progress in extensive meetings the last seven days, and was close to reaching a cease-fire by all Palestinian factions, dependent on Israel's doing its part to help him by declaring a corresponding cease-fire from its side. Such a development could help all peoples live in love and reconciliation and give a chance to peace. "It's our luck and destiny to live together," he said. "We can choose intelligently, and choose to live in peace, tranquility, and love, or we can choose the opposite, continuing killing and destruction."

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Melchior Outlines Actions within GOI  
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18. (C) Rabbi Melchior, who was warmly addressed throughout by Sheikhs Falouji and Sidr as "our friend, Chacham (Rabbi) Melchior," encouraged all present to take heart from, and take advantage of, the new opening for peace that was presented by the formation of new Palestinian and Israeli governments since their December 5, 2004 meeting. He made an impassioned plea for the leaders to move beyond the

theoretical and work toward practical, visible results in their communities: through education, humanitarian assistance, and getting their messages of peace and tolerance out publicly so that citizens at the grassroots would be encouraged to demand that their leaders make every effort for peace. "I suggest this because I am being practical. As religious leaders, we know that a political peace is just that -- a political peace. A religious peace would go deeper, addressing and healing the sources of the conflict." He mentioned that in his interfaith dialogue work inside Israel since the Alexandria Declaration, there is an expanding group of rabbis committed to the Alexandria Group's work and to implementing what is agreed to on both "the political and religious tracks."

19. (C) With Labor back in the government and Melchior back in a Deputy Minister position, he promised to work hard to resolve the travel permit issue that was causing embarrassment and humiliation to the Palestinian religious leaders and interrupting their ability to be full players in support of the peace process. He undertook to seek blanket permits for Alexandria Group members, adding, "this doesn't depend on us (Labor) alone, but it is a top priority." Tamimi remarked, "I am glad you are in the government again, because you are a man of peace."

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Sidr and Melchior Take Dialogue on the Road  
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10. (C) Rabbi Melchior and Sheikh Talal Sidr briefed participants on their recent joint trip to Brussels for a large conference of Rabbis and Imams organized by a French organization under the direction of an individual named Alain Michel. Jarjoui protested that the Brussels meeting - the location and date of which were changed many times before it was finally held in early January - should have included Palestinian Christian leaders from the Alexandria Group. Melchior said the meeting was not held under the framework of Alexandria, but was instead the initiative of a well-meaning Frenchman with limited awareness of the intricacies of the Israeli-Palestinian situation. It was focused on the need for expanding dialogue and understanding between Jewish and Muslim populations in Europe, and as such, had its use. He added that he, as a Jew who emigrated from Europe, understood how Palestinian Christians feel about being excluded, being a small minority in their land. He committed to continue lobbying, as he had before Brussels, for full participation by Palestinian Christians in such inter-faith meetings.

11. (SBU) In December 2004, Sidr and Melchior traveled on a joint speaking tour in the UK arranged by Canon White, which included meetings with the Archbishop of Canterbury and senior officials in the British Foreign Office, as well as public sessions. White informed Embassy and Consulate PD and POL officers January 19 that Congressman Lantos recently invited the two to speak jointly at a public Congressional hearing March 1, 2005.

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